

Orphans of the NPS

The NPS Clearinghouse

Kathleen Byrne

What do the Thomas Moran paintings hanging in the Interior Secretary's office, a 17th-century bellarmine jug at Colonial National Historical Park, and a brush without most of its bristles have in common? They were or are all part of the NPS Clearinghouse collection of museum objects, sometimes referred to as the "orphans of the National Park Service."

In direct contrast to the site-specific nature of museum collections in the parks, the NPS Clearinghouse serves as a repository for an eclectic collection of objects that were brought together due to their lack of provenience to any NPS site. Many of the objects were received from parks because the objects did not fit within the Scope of Collection for the park. Others were purchased and deposited at the Clearinghouse until they might be needed at a park or a future site, and some are of unknown or lost provenience.

The Clearinghouse is one of the programs of the Curatorial Services Division, Washington Office, but it is located, along with the National Catalog, in the bombshelter underneath the Mather Employee Development Center in Harpers Ferry, WV. A few large objects are stored at the Museum and Archeological Regional Storage facility in Maryland. In the early 1980s the Clearinghouse stopped accepting the physical custody of objects, with the goal of deaccessioning the entire collection and discontinuing storage. Since 1985, the collection has dropped in size from approximately 3,100 objects to 1,600. Nearly 300 objects of the current total are on loan with the intention of deaccessioning them when NPS deaccessioning authority is expanded to include transfers or donations outside the Service.

The majority of the present collection consists of 19th- to mid-20th century history objects, including furnishings, clothing, textiles, tools, ceramics, prints, and various miscellaneous materials. Although some of these objects, like the brush without bristles, are in poor condition, many could be placed on exhibit or in a study collection. The Clearinghouse staff advertises these objects through inventory lists and the Clearinghouse Classifieds, a newsletter of excess and needed objects that is sent throughout the Service and to over 200 non-NPS museums. The latest issue of the Classifieds included ads for lamp chimneys, pipe bowls, coverlets, and coats at the Clearinghouse and ads from Morristown National Historical Park, Joshua Tree National Monument, and the Department of the Interior Museum.

Most Clearinghouse objects, such as the bellarmine jug transferred to Colonial, are transferred to parks; however, Clearinghouse objects are also on loan to several institutions, including the Smithsonian, Westpoint, and the Old Executive Office Building. In recent years, the Clearinghouse staff has conducted several exchanges of Clearinghouse objects for objects needed by parks.

The Clearinghouse staff is available to assist parks in transferring or exchanging objects that are outside the approved Scope of Collection Statement and in acquiring objects, either from the Clearinghouse collection or other sources, to fill needs identified in a park's Scope of Collection Statement. To this end, parks, non-NPS institutions, and individuals are encouraged to place ads in the Clearinghouse Classifieds. Ads are free and may include non-museum objects. To place an ad or be placed on the Classifieds mailing list, contact the NPS Clearinghouse at the Bombshelter, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425, or phone 304-535-6202.

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NPS Joins Test of Micromist Fire Suppression System

John E. Hunter

The National Park Service is always looking for new and innovative ways to better protect its cultural resources. Improving the quality of fire detection and suppression and encouraging their more widespread use are high priorities. For this reason, the NPS is taking a hard look at a new type of fire suppression system just introduced into this country.

A micromist system under testing by Reliable Automatic Sprinkler Corporation, Beaumac Corporation, Marriott Hotels, and the University of Maryland Fire and Rescue Institute is an unusual variation of a water sprin-

kler system. Taking water from either a fire main or a fixed quantity tank, the micromist system discharges water at about 1000 psi pressure through 1/2" stainless steel tubing. Special fine orifice nozzles located along the tubing inject an extremely fine aerosol (about 9-15 microns diameter) of water droplets into the air, producing a high efficiency cooling fog, which extinguishes fires with significantly less water than other standard sprinkler methods. Initial tests on mocked-up hotel rooms, for example, have demonstrated extinguishment with about 1-4 gallons of water, including fires set under beds. This amount of water contrasts dramatically with the usual 20-40 gallons of water discharged per minute by a typical conventional sprinkler head.

The micromist system is activated by smoke detection equipment in the same way that gaseous extinguishing systems, such as Halon 1301, are activated.

Tests on similar systems in Europe showed them to be safe in computer rooms, switch gear rooms, store rooms, marine engine rooms, shipboard quarters and public areas, and a variety of other structures and spaces. The